

Training and Administrative Development : a Khartoum Experiment

Donald Curtis

For want of a better definition, development administration is best described as administration which people with development responsibility can do. A loose definition like this is thrust upon us for want of any commonly accepted theory about why (or if) administration in development is different, or of what constitutes appropriate administration.¹

For the same reason, an empirical test is more or less the sole criterion of applicability and needs to come early in any prescriptive process. However, this is seldom the case in any development project, where administration is usually built on conventional models and administrative training is a separate and generalised addition to the budget, quite separate from processes of project identification, appraisal and implementation. While there is now growing acceptance that technology should be appropriate and that this involves the exploration of alternatives, it is often assumed that how to administer is known and unproblematic: all that remains is to train people to do it. In consequence the test of administrative procedures tends now to fall to practitioners themselves or to trainers. The latter are often classroom bound or foreign and in the worst position to give practical guidance.

Encounters in the classroom with serving administrators soon lead to questions about the relevance of ideas on offer, which do not go away when one claims to be enunciating general principles, or providing analytic tools for selective use in different environments. So one finds in training centres a constant search for techniques that will give training a more immediate impact. Trainers try to keep abreast of what is going on in the field through research and consultancy; case studies in various guises are extensively used and teaching techniques which draw upon the experience of trainees are popular. These approaches have the virtue of bringing experience from the field into

the classroom, but they lack the final test of applicability: that they can be done in the field within available time, skill and resources. To meet these conditions within a training context is of course very difficult since any intervention changes the constraints under which the administration operates, but in the recent Course in Development for Local Government Officers in the Sudan, colleagues and I stumbled on a technique which, with improvement, might come close to the twin objectives of being a training exercise as well as an empirical test of an administrative procedure.²

Policy investigation through a field project

The training course in Khartoum contained a field project investigating public policy towards the informal sector of industry in Khartoum. The object was to investigate a situation in which real alternatives existed for government policy and where there seemed to be some uncertainty how to proceed. Informal sector production has a certain topicality in the Sudan following the ILO mission in 1976 and the subsequent conference on the subject in 1978 (unpublished). It stood as a good example of an area in which a development-oriented local government should be taking an active interest (since it has been involved in the issue of licences and control of land).

Field projects are of course nothing new in administrative training. However, most are based on guided tours of successful endeavours in the charge of a senior official. Since this is something that most course organisers try to avoid, our original intention was to achieve more interaction with beneficiaries and with a wider range of officials. As we thought out the logistics of the exercise, however, the approach had obvious possibilities as something more like research both in its data collection techniques and in the generation of ideas and hypotheses. The further we got into it the more it approximated to the kind of survey technique that one could use for rapid project evaluation or appraisal.

¹ These constitute two quite different approaches to the study of administration, neither of which is making much headway at the moment. The study of development administration as a social phenomenon moved into low key after the system building endeavours of Riggs (1964) and only in health care delivery is there wide experiment on how to structure administrative systems appropriately to suit programme objectives.

² The Course in Development for Local Government Officers was run by the Institute of Public Administration in Khartoum in conjunction with the Development Administration Group. The course director was Ali Zeid Breima, a preparatory note on current issues in the study of informal sector production was prepared by Andrew Shepherd and the field project was managed by Douglas Lamb and myself.

Our training exercise therefore came to represent the exploration not only of policy in relation to particular fields of activity, but also of rapid evaluation and appraisal techniques. Course participants finished up not only with new ideas about the needs and capabilities of small producers in towns but also with some techniques which they could use to explore other sectoral needs. This field project and another using a similar approach looking into an irrigation and settlement scheme some miles north of Khartoum on the banks of the White Nile, generated a very enthusiastic response amongst course participants. They experienced the excitement of a process which made quite new sense of something with which they had long been familiar. For the trainers there were several satisfactions: the exercise took us into the field for some active research, it provided an excellent learning opportunity and it gave us ideas about how internal programme evaluation might work.

Our study of small-scale producers and of government policy towards them took place in two stages. In the first the course split up into twos and interviewed producers at their places of work; in the second it divided into larger teams and interviewed the officers of relevant authorities. The first stage was preceded by some background studies of the short intellectual and practical history of concern with the informal sector, linking this with the discussion of economic growth models, questions of social organisation and political representation. Recent findings from elsewhere in Africa and in India (Steel 1977, Mosley 1977, Mars 1977) and the ILO study of Khartoum itself (ILO 1976) were used to raise some conceptual issues and to suggest some initial hypotheses for our own work in Khartoum.

The course then decided what should be the main issues to raise with small producers, and pre-tested a questionnaire in mock interview in class. Questions were mostly open-ended and the two person teams were free to raise other issues during the interviews. The idea was that they should go out able to explore issues for themselves, confident that they were contributing to a common base of information from the questionnaires.

To carry out the interviews with producers, the course members were taken to two areas where small-scale production predominated and were sent out to interview as many producers as possible, choosing different types of production and scale of enterprise where possible. No formal sampling procedure was used due to lack of time and the difficulty of devising a sampling frame. Again the procedure worked well as a teaching

device but less well as a formal survey procedure. Nevertheless, data analysis did yield results that were in many ways surprising and which served to open up a number of quite important questions about policy.

Results of the first phase served as an excellent briefing for the second, in which larger groups of course participants interviewed officials in several central government, local government, and political organisations.

The needs of informal sector producers

Some findings from Sejana and Khartoum North can be given as examples of the kind of policy issues that may be aired through a study of this kind, brief and methodologically untidy though it may be. The findings presented illustrate the way in which field study may be used not only to test hypotheses but to open up new policy issues.

Do small producers grow into large as the ILO and other promoters of informal sector support often argue? This is a question of practical importance because governments may seek to invest money in small factory buildings and industrial estates in the belief that this will enable workshop type enterprises to grow in scale and scope of production. In this case we had before us the paper by Zoe Mars on Kerala providing evidence that this pattern of growth does not take place and explaining why. Workshop type producers have neither the resources nor the managerial background to grow beyond a certain size. In Kerala, new opportunities for small factory development in the form of sites and subsidies, where suitable at all, were taken up by people whose industrial or family estate background gave them the necessary managerial expertise and access to resources.

These findings encouraged us to follow Mars in her differentiation of small producers on the basis of technology into 'hand', 'power' and 'machine' production. However, we found in practice that there was more difference between the machine type concerns, distinguished by a higher degree of division of labour and continuous operation of machines, and the rest. Whether people used hand tools or power tools did not seem to make much difference to their style of operation. The division between machine production and the rest roughly approximated to the division between workshops and small factories. We found that:

—the proprietors of small factories had more formal education than those in workshops and

often quoted travel abroad or the use of foreign expertise as a means of acquiring skills, while the others were usually craft trained through family or formal apprenticeship;

—the range of employment amongst the eight machine type firms which we encountered, between one and 85, was much greater than that within the power and hand groups, which varied between one and 13, averaging three or four;

—the products of the machine producers were predominantly goods which were suited to mass production for mass markets, while the workshop type enterprises made goods more suited to local markets and to unit or batch production;

—we also gained impressions, from some accounts of the recent history of firms, that the machine type firms were quite capable of both growth and diversification in production, while hand and power type concerns, most of which were very well established in these locations, were not capable of increase in size nor of diversification into other trades.³

These findings fit well with the picture which Mars paints for Kerala. The managerial skills and resources of the kind of men who run factories are quite different from those who run small workshops. The former can trade in distant markets, deal with officials for licences, loans or import requirements, and buy in the skills which they do not have themselves. The latter buy and sell 'over the counter' and are at a disadvantage in their dealings with authority. The former can grow by expansion, the latter more often by replication. These are findings with important public policy implications: for instance, the way that sites and services are allocated should reflect different patterns of growth.

The different types of concern faced similar difficulties in production, though they differed in their responses. To an open ended question on their main problems all types of firms complained more about the periodic non-availability of raw materials than all other difficulties such as power cuts, shortage of space, or lack of skilled labour. They also complained about the price of raw materials. But temporary shut-downs for want of anything to work upon were frequent. It may be that the firms interviewed were untypical in their degree of dependence upon imported or high

quality raw materials, several being in the steel, mechanical, or quality furniture trades, but this does nonetheless suggest a very important focus for public policy. Workshops are more vulnerable to shortages than factories since they rely upon local suppliers and have no ability to carry buffer stocks. This was something which one of the unions representing workshop type producers recognised but which had not yet been taken up by higher authority.

Interestingly the same question gave equal indication of where *not* to start in public policy. Only one out of 35 producers (and each was asked to give three main problems) made any mention of credit. This low rating was repeated in response to another open ended question on what 'services for expansion' they would favour. This finding gave us pause for thought: particularly since the ILO had, as usual, recommended a credit policy (ILO 1976). But credit is required mostly for expansion; if for workshop type concerns expansion is limited by other factors like managerial styles and skills, this might explain the lack of demand. Also, for firms subject to stoppages for want of raw materials credit increases their risks. Risk avoidance may be as much a strategy for small firms as for small farms, and nothing increases the risks as much as the requirements of loan repayments. So we concluded that there were some quite serious theoretical grounds for doubting whether a credit scheme would be a good foundation for policy towards the informal sector in this setting.

Our open-ended questions did not give quite such clear indications about how to improve organisation. Better organised supply is clearly required but options are many and, as usual, sociological imagination is scarce. We found that some producers simply called for better supply without suggesting how this should be done. Some demanded better government controls on prices and marketing, but one or two saw a future in better political representation or in the cooperative organisation of supplies. This last was something which, in the second half of the study, we found that the officially recognised Small Scale Enterprises Union had placed high on their list of demands. An organisation capable of buying in bulk and importing in its own right, on an equal basis with small factories, what what they wanted. The demand seemed obvious and neatly equated with our findings about material supply problems. But wholesale cooperatives to serve private enterprise are not common. Marketing and credit cooperatives are encouraged in cooperative ideology but wholesale cooperatives are usually seen as second-tier organisations to serve primary

³ The results of the survey are fully reported in Curtis, "Small scale industry promotion: report on a field project", D.A.G. Occasional Paper, 1979.

producer or consumer cooperatives. The recently revitalised cooperative ministry in Khartoum was taking an interest in informal sector production, having recently sponsored a conference on the subject, but from our contacts there it seemed that the ministry was thinking more in conventional terms about starting producer or credit cooperatives. The demand, being clearly articulated through the union, for a cooperative in the bulk purchase business did not seem to have reached them.

So a simple two-stage survey, well within the data handling capability of the larger local government offices, served both to demonstrate the relevance of more theoretical work from elsewhere and to raise at least three strategic issues which might help to shape future policy towards this sector.

Conclusions

It is suggested above that what served in Khartoum as a very useful teaching method could stand as a model of a simple and rapid policy evaluation or appraisal technique for use by the authorities themselves. The question is how far this approach, with improvement, could provide a viable model for concurrent 'in house' evaluation. This is something which we hope to put to the test in an exercise in district level monitoring and concurrent evaluation in India,⁴ but in the meantime we are aware of a number of potential limitations.

The advantage of the approach is that it can be tried out with the people who will be responsible for using it as part of their jobs within administration. They should be in a position to assess whether the techniques could be put into practice as they learn how to use them. However, any training exercise serves to remove officials temporarily from the hierarchical and political constraints of office. Critical evaluation of official programmes while on secondment for training may serve as a heady tonic to someone released from these constraints, but they reappear when the burden of day-to-day responsibilities is taken up again.

A training course also brings into the exercise outsiders whose justification is their comparative experience and novel perspectives. An essential element in evaluation is the attempt to establish the *untruth* of certain assumptions that administration has been holding about the effects of its programmes. Two factors will influence the ability of serving administrations to do this: honesty,

and the ability to generate a critical perspective on their own work. The suspicion that officials will be inclined to safeguard their own interests and defend themselves from criticism if they are involved in evaluation has always backed arguments for having evaluations carried out by external agencies. But there are two things wrong with this. One is that the sole, or even primary pattern of defensiveness in authorities is against criticism. In-house evaluation by middle-ranking officials could be used by them as a means of achieving initiative or of defending themselves against the unreasonable requests of high-ranking officials. Conversely central managers can use evaluation to maintain initiative by getting staff sections to appraise critically the work of line workers. Also an internal evaluation can be used as a pre-emptive move against external criticism. In all cases evaluation may well raise some tensions within the organisation, but nothing is more likely to create unified resistance than external evaluation. From the point of view of conflict management a combination of internal and external evaluation may have advantages. This combination is present in a training exercise but, by definition, absent in the internal evaluation for which the exercise is supposed to serve as a model.

More critical may be the absence of outsiders in helping to generate a critical perspective on the work of the organisation. People in organisations are not encouraged to explore alternative viewpoints to their own. They need to make all sorts of validating assumptions about their activity: to evolve an operating ideology before anybody is prepared to act at all. Organisers, like playwrights, must 'suspend disbelief' for the duration of the action at least: but evaluators, like theatre critics, must be prepared to disbelieve (or perhaps suspend the suspension of disbelief) for the purpose of analysis. It is certainly not impossible for internal evaluators to be so objective, but the quickest way of getting comparative perspective into an organisation will probably be to bring in experience from elsewhere.

These two conclusions would point to the need for a continuing role for outsiders within otherwise internal evaluations. This suggests that the Khartoum training exercise would serve as a model for evaluation only if replicated in full: that is, if fairly senior administrators who have local knowledge and ability to influence decisions get together with outsiders who have a commitment to producing alternative viewpoints. This, however, may be far too comfortable a conclusion

⁴ For which Watson's paper in this collection is preparation.

for those of us who enjoy the outsider role. Ideas are free-floating after all. We may be replaced by books but local talent is indispensable.

References

- ILO, 1976, Growth, Employment and Equity: a comprehensive strategy for the Sudan, *Technical Paper No. 13*, Geneva
- Mars, Z., 1977, Small Scale Industry in Kerala, *IDS Discussion Paper No. 105*, IDS, Sussex
- Mosley, P., 1977, Implicit Models and Policy Recommendations: reflections on the employment problem in Kenya, Institute of British Geographers Conference on the Urban Informal Sector in the Third World, March
- Riggs, F. W., 1964, *Administration in Developing Countries*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston
- Steel, W. F., 1977, *Small Scale Employment and Production in Developing Countries: evidence from Ghana*, Prager, New York